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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the languages that interfered with Nigerian secondary school students' learning of French, focusing on the Esan-West and Esan Central local government areas of Edo State. It also examined error types identified in students' scripts, error types caused by the most interfering language, error types occurring most frequently, error levels in the schools, and class levels, at which students committed the highest number of errors. Students in schools where French was still offered completed surveys to determine their mother tongues and other languages spoken, then wrote two essays in French. Analysis of students' errors highlighted two broad categories: lexical errors and structural errors. Results indicated that all of the students wrote and spoke English, the official language of instruction in Nigeria, and 81.3 percent of the students claimed to write and speak Esan. Errors in their writing were traced to English, which was the most interfering language. Errors of meaninglessness and clumsy expressions were the most frequent error types, followed by errors of conjugation scoring. Esan did not interfere with students' learning of French. (Contains 66 references.) (SM)

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National and Official Languages in Nigeria: Reflections on Linguistic Interference and the Impact of Language Policy and Politics on Minority Languages

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Introduction

Known for its "extreme linguistic diversity" (Elugbe 1994), Nigeria is home to languages numbering about 400. Although its land mass is less than 7 per cent of the total area of the African continent, most scholars concur that about 20 per cent of Africa's more than 2,000 languages are spoken in Nigeria. Official language policies have variously been enunciated in documents such as the National Policy on Education (1977, revised in 1981), and the 1979 Constitution. Two other less cited documents exist, to wit the 1989 Constitution and the 1987 Political Bureau report. Such policies testify to the attention supposedly devoted to education, unity and independence.

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1. National and Official Languages in Nigeria: Minority Languages, Language Policy and Politics

Minority and majority languages in Africa derive their designations from numbers of speakers, literary, political or educational status. However, this dichotomy becomes dubious when a minority language employed at the national or state level assumes the status of a major language (Bamgbose 1994). Furthermore, the combined strength of all the minority languages within a polity may render the denomination "minority" a misnomer on account of its suggestive, ideologized meaning of insignificance or smallness. For instance, the combined size of minority languages in Ghana reaches more than 45% of the country's population, while in Nigeria that fraction is estimated to be over 37%.

Literacy and development in Nigeria are thus best apprehended in the context of language planning in a multilingual society. With regard to minority language use, we imply in this paper that literacy, communication and the linguistic implications of literacy development fall into the ambit of resource planning (Kaplan and Baldauf Jr. 1997) and its inherent politics. The innate heterogeneity of the Nigerian linguistic reality is fertile for an appraisal of the intractable literacy deficit that continues to defy the lip service of political rhetoric since early in the1980s. In 1980, for instance, 30 million out of 80 million Nigerians were illiterate, while today that number extrapolates to more than 50 million of an estimated population of 120 million, a figure recently put in doubt by the Minister of Internal Affairs, who proposes 160 million as being more accurate (Guardiannews.com of May 13, 2003). The fact that most minority languages are yet to be well described and used at the grassroots levels contributes in no small measure to this lamentable detail.

Furthermore, a well considered response to the imperative of national development in an African society such as Nigeria must include modifying the perennially misplaced notion that monolingualism, or the elusive search for *a* national language, is *the* panacea for underdevelopment and the inaccessibility of academic, economic, political and technological knowledge. As a countervailing measure, a return to literacy in the local or indigenous languages is urgently compelling, as substantiated by the May 18, 2002 *Guardiannews.com* report of the Federal Education Minister lamenting the country's illiteracy rate and school drop-out levels. In the context of the Education For All (EPA) programme deadline of 2015, even the Minister claimed that 50% of Nigerians have never seen the inside of a school, while a significant proportion absconds from formal educational institutions.

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Three fluctuations are discernible in the use of the term "national languages" in many African states. While the ambiguity of the designation "national" stems from the diachronic overloading of the notions implied, the territorial and political considerations have endured (Brann 1985). As a result, it is often problematic to apprehend the distinction between language and dialect, but the term nation, once clarified, is a denomination which conjures up nationalities as polities, if not cultural entities. The designation "language of the soil", or *chthonolect*, constitutes one category. With regard to their ethno-demographic, zonal or territorial representative character, choices in multilingual communities are often negotiated in accordance with geographical, cultural, political, occasionally religious, but rarely linguistic and economic criteria. For the corresponding regional or partially representative characteristic, the term *choralect* is reserved.

In the third category, a single "elected" language (or *demolect*) is symbolically attributed to the nation as a whole. In Nigeria, this option has been assiduously avoided, though the three majority languages perform some of the functions ascribed to the second and third categories, both regionally and nationally. Therefore, it is relevant to examine the glottopolitical impact on minority languages of existing language planning strategies formulated at the national, state and local government levels.

Two main modern pronouncements on language policy in Nigeria merit our attention, to wit the National Policy on Education (1977, revised in 1981), and the 1979 Constitution, which is more cited than its 1989 reincarnation. (Elugbe 1994). The focus on education is, of course, manifest in the clichéd emphasis on the role of language in education. These allusions continue to suggest that in the pre-primary and primary levels, the medium of instruction will [initially] be the mother tongue of the immediate community. However, in practice, implementation of this laudable ideal has in the main calcified.

1.2 Minority languages in a multilingual Nigeria

The rationale for the reflections that follow resides in the attempt, on a macro-linguistic level, to shepherd the arguments for what is feasible, practical and sensible in the quest to accommodate the tools necessary to ensure mass participation in the national development and democratic processes. Sadly, the latter is often left in the hands of political opportunists, and thus articulated through a web of falsely representative political and administrative processes tarnished by regional political and linguistic biases. The incessant groundswell of agitations in minority communities testifies to the need to deconstruct and reconstruct current received views and policies, and to enhance the value in using local languages as a means of inclusion and mobilization for the national and regional good.

Our premise therefore hinges unassailably on the evidence that multiculturalism, pluralism and multilingualism remain immutable facts of African life, which elements must be harnessed for national development. Bamgbose (1994:33-43), as others have done, effectively dismantles the recurrent arguments against this assertion, as he debunks the myths exagerating the negative impact of multilingualism on national integration and development. In so doing, he demonstrates that national development is almost always described in terms of economic growth, attainment of economic targets, increase in GNP or GDP, rise in per capita income, etc., as reflected in the treatise by Allardt (1973:268-71). Indicators of national development are thus referenced against sectoral allocations of resources, such as industry, defense, education, technology, administration, communication, etc. Societal goals within this conceptual reference embrace economic prosperity and growth as expressed in per capita and employment rates, political efficiency, political participation and modernization efforts. In Nigeria, for instance, these are supposed to trickle down to the local levels through an inefficient process dominated by a corrupt, ineffective and narcissistic bureaucracy spawned and condoned by a broken public and political infrastructure (one must have lived in Nigeria to appreciate this remark). Little wonder, therefore, that national development, viewed through these prisms of modernization and revitalization, remains fossilized and farcical.

Individual goals, on the other hand, are expressed in terms of level of welfare, private consumption, housing and spending, life expectancy, freedom to choose jobs or belong to organizations and political movements, etc., including a slate of individual cultural and linguistic groupings. The freedom to communicate in a viable local language cannot therefore be excluded from this reasoning.

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However complete the above enumeration is viewed, it still remains a parochial concept of development which, in spite of the assumed role and place of language, fails to delineate the importance of minority languages to their speakers. Such narrow definitions are defective in their inability to harmonize their modalities and goals with the ideals of smaller and often insular minority groups. Thus, this disservice unfairly subsumes the essence of these communities in the miscues and mostly theoretical, if abject notions of national development better viewed in humanistic terms.

Allusions have disingenuously been made to the low per capita GNP of heterogeneous states that are simultaneously economically underdeveloped, while linguistically homogeneous states with moderate to high per capita GNP are deemed to be relatively economically well-developed (Bamgbose, 1994:37, citing Banks and Textor 1963). But using the same cross-polity data, Fishman (1968) has debunked any necessary correspondence between linguistic heterogeneity and low economic status and vice versa, as Bamgbose lays bare in the following analysis. Of the 114 countries examined, 52 are linguistically homogeneous, while 62 are heterogeneous. Of the 52, 25 (about 50%) have low or very low per capita GNP, while 47 of the 62 (about 75%) have low or very low per capita GNP. African countries, with the exception of South Africa at the time, belong to the category of low or very low per capita GNP, a grouping that includes not only the linguistically homogeneous Arab countries of North Africa, but also the linguistically homogeneous black countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia and Madagascar.

The above conclusions therefore suggest that other significant variables are at work, though one must concede that there might be some validity to the contributory factor of language diversity, mainly due to unresponsive and insensitive language policy formulation and implementation in spheres where it would clearly ameliorate such austere assessments. What is clear, though, is that language diversity cannot be solely blamed for the lot of poorer countries as suggested by some (see Pool 1972:214, Fishman 1968:63 on sectionalism and politically unassimilated minorities seen as impediments to national integration and development). In any case, linguistic heterogeneity in modern states (Connor 1972:320; Leclerc 1992) will remain a hard fact for a long time yet, irrespective of the giant strides of globalization in a broad spectrum of areas.

Urgently recommending itself, as a corollary of the unacceptable situation whereby large communities are literally in the dark about important local and national issues (or at best in receipt of skewed and incomplete information), is a critical deconstruction of current terms of reference. The upsurge of the preferences for local level perspectives, with emphasis on practice and actual usage (Fardon and Furniss 1994), is building in concerned minority language communities. This point invariably suggests a purposefully pragmatic, local (grassroots) sponsorship of a remodeled understanding of local literacy and communication needs in contradistinction to the forlorn programmatic implementation of existing policies at the national and state levels.

With the benefit of over four decades of post-colonial experience, during which period nothing but pitiable progress has been recorded, this time is as auspicious as any to critically examine the legacy of language planning with a view to jettisoning redundant and unproductive practices in favour of policies that are socially and culturally responsible and relevant. To achieve this, it becomes manifest that Nigeria must consider language as a political object, as a subject of discourse in a myriad of avenues of usage, and in its underrated importance to national development politics.

The linguistic insecurity endured by the less described languages stems from the insouciance of an insensitive political and administrative system. Policies on the ground perpetuate domination, neglect, and a disequilibrium in the economic, educational and political dimensions of national life, a fact particularly palpable at the grassroots. This sentiment has spurred interest in the (endangered) minority languages of Nigeria. It is noteworthy that while self-preservation is often adduced to explain the added urgency, studies of minority languages are in the main carried out with little or no institutional support or assistance from the various levels of government. Inextricably related to issues of cultural identity, these efforts are largely nominal, given the gravity of the situation and the dearth of resources to pursue the linguistic and terminological development of these languages.

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2. The Esan Language

Esan is one of such languages. Spoken in Edo State, formerly a part of Bendel State, it now counts well over 300,000 speakers, 100,000 in excess of SIL's 1973 estimates. In the 1963 national census, it was not even mentioned as a language, irrespective of the fact that a significant number spoke it then as a first language. It spans the local government areas formerly called Agbazilo, Okpebho, parts of Owan and Etsako. It is often categorized as a member of the Niger-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Edoid, North-Central, and Edo-Esan-Ora families. Thanks to renewed individual efforts, it is now described as a regionally important language (SIL, 1996, Brann 1993, Elugbe 1994). Contrary to contentions by distant commentators, it is not actually widely used in initial primary education due to the absence of its sustained linguistic description. It is commonplace to see highly educated speakers of Esan interspersing their speech with English, or with one or more of the majority languages. Within this multilingual communication, and given the natural diffusion processes within the Nigerian population and language systems, a real danger lurks in the form of a shift.

For a sampling of public sentiments on this issue, we again refer to the editorial of the Guardiannews of November 2 1999 in which Pat Utomi authored the following: "If the truth be told, Nigeria is a country of minorities. Put together, the so-called minorities of Nigeria constitute a bigger bloc than the so-called majority groups put together". In the same vein, Eskor Toyo in the Guardiannews of September 1999 argued that ethnic and religious minorities have too often been neglected and frequently exploited and persecuted in spite of all the legislative and political machinery in place to forestall such a situation.

2.1 Majority / Minority Languages Dichotomy in Nigeria

In contemplating the relative place and role of minority languages in the Nigerian polity, three observations are indispensable. Firstly, the laboriously retreaded dichotomy between majority and minority languages in Nigeria is arbitrary (Bamgbose 1984:21). While the number of speakers jump to mind, such division is also based on other considerations such as literacy, political, or educational status. This assertion is exemplified by the allusion to the selection of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as the three major / national languages, a designation also ineptly peddled as their confirmation as official languages, besides English, out of more than 400 languages. While these languages are evidently spoken more than all others on a per capita basis, they also share the additional characteristics outlined above with a fourth language, Efik, considered by current measurements as a minority language. This is not exclusive to Nigeria. In Ghana, there exists an analogy. While four majority languages are recognized, namely Twi, Fante (a dialect cluster of Akan), Ewe and Ga on the basis of their written tradition and prestige as examination subjects at the end of the secondary school cycle, however, two other languages, Guan and Adangbe, are excluded from the majority language category, though they have an even higher number of speakers than Ga.

Secondly, and flowing from the foregoing point, the minority / majority distinction is relative. To illustrate this observation, a language deemed to be minority at the federal level may assume majority status on a different administrative level, such as national (employed in its acceptation depicting nations within the Nigerian federal polity) or state, as represented by the case of Efik in the Cross River and Akwa Ibom states. Furthermore, majority languages within different national or political boundaries may be much smaller than minority languages in other polities. Other cases exist in which political considerations inform such definition parameters. Kaplan and Baldauf Jr. (1997:14-27) highlight this imbroglio as they grapple with the terminological difficulties inherent in the initial basis for language planning. From these authors, we extract instances that classify existing considerations into the following four categories. The political criteria encompass languages of wider communication, national language, official (usually marking instances where languages are unwilling to cede supremacy) and literary languages, regional languages and, perhaps, religious languages. Next are social definitions which subsume educational languages, vernacular, classical and historical languages. The third group, the educational definition category, includes foreign languages, second languages and mother tongues for educational purposes. The fourth group concerns popular definitions that refer to foreign languages as languages not spoken within the polity, native languages, usually in

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reference to majority populations on historical grounds and "foreigner languages" spoken by transient foreigners in the community. In this last group is also pidgin, normally associated with a lack of systematic grammar and a restrictive lexicon.

Thirdly, and lastly in the minority / majority distinction, the term "minority language" is often loaded with ideological inferences borne out of a myriad of power, political and economic considerations. However, it must be noted that, as evident in the stridently unified voice of political figures and professionals of substance in the South-South geopolitical grouping of Nigeria, the combined strength of minority languages can be politically potent. Brann (1985) alludes to the diachronic overloading of the term, in addition to the territorial and political considerations that have persisted. The effect of these extraneous considerations, as it were, quite apart from the sheer numbers of the languages at play, cannot be dismissed.

The foregoing observations coalesce to situate discussions such as ours in the "context of the allotted function of a language in a country's language policy" (Bamgbose 1984:22). For instance, a majority language status can, expectedly, be conferred on a national language. In consequence, such a language would almost certainly be employed in secondary and tertiary education, or in communication (e.g. in political discourse) and administration at the national level. Conversely, a minority language may equally be used in primary education and in adult literacy programmes in a way specifically designed to respond to an important local need left unmet, or in direct recognition of antecedent and prevailing political realities within a given polity. In either instance, such a language cannot arrogate to itself the status of a national official language. In the latter case, we refer to Desheriev (1973) who writes on the tripartite classification in the former USSR of major, medium-sized and minority languages (see also Isayev 1977). The first category was used at all levels of education, the second up to secondary and the third in elementary and adult literacy only. For good cause, the scope of the last category can be broadened in Nigeria by a conscious effort to tackle the pervasive literacy deficit at the local level. The resulting dearth of the dividends of literacy invariably impedes the political participation of the affected communities who have to rely on unscrupulous politicians who feign a noble desire to act on behalf of marginalized communities.

3. LITERACY AND LANGUAGE CHOICE

In Nigeria, the overall literacy project cannot be separated from the formulation of language policies in relation to the multiplex of social and political, if constitutional realities. The 1979 Constitution explicitly recognizes the importance of language policies with teeth, much like its several reincarnations. The majority status confers on the majority languages their use in the National Assembly and other high state functions, quite apart from English, at the national and state levels. But, by the same token, the National Policy on Education prescribes the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction in primary schools. It also exhorts every child to learn one of the three major languages of the country. Although the policy appears reticent, if not ambivalent, about which languages to be used in adult literacy classes, it does clearly state "that in character and content all mass literacy programmes will be adapted in each case to local cultural and sociological conditions" (National Policy on Education, 1981:32). This has been severally interpreted to include the use of local languages in literacy programmes across the country. More often than not, these grandiose and lofty provisions turn out to be mere insinuations since no concerted effort is clearly discernible in the development and implementation of such policies. This is another confirmation of the gulf between language politics (mere words) and language planning (road map to concretize stated ideals and targets) and language policy (specific government-backed implementation strategies).

Another factor that may affect the choice of language for literacy concerns the goal envisaged for the literacy programme. This leads to the separation by literacy specialists of traditional literacy from functional literacy. One of several UNESCO documents spanning 1969-1971 posits for instance that traditional literacy could be offered in isolation, since it is aimed at all illiterates (UNESCO survey, 1969-71). Its goal is in the main "humanistic, and the adult is declared literate upon satisfying the conditions of the prescribed tests" (Bamgbose 1984:22) at the end of the programme. Functional literacy, on the other hand, should be part of a broader development effort. But it is consciously

selective (since it is offered to those who can benefit and contribute most to development as a result of being literate). As such, it extends beyond mere certification for work, as it is by extension an initial step in a continuing process of learning in the bid to enhance social status. This dividend, achieved via targeted literacy programmes should therefore be extended more widely into the acquisition of the enabling linguistic tools necessary for optimal participation in the political processes mediated by language and language use.

Whatever attention literacy in minority mother tongues has received thus far in Nigeria, it has indubitably materialized under the rubric of traditional literacy. Whatever minimal success there has been in overall minority language literacy, it has tended to occur to the extent that local effort has been sustained. It therefore is unambiguous that learning to read, write and count is best achieved using a language in which the learner already enjoys some oral proficiency, irrespective of cases in which such languages are yet to have a fully developed written form. The need to read in a language often leads to modest efforts that spur further development of its written form. It is quite arduous to sustain the argument that these languages should simply make way for the major and more developed languages in these minority enclaves, a term we employ advisedly to accentuate the isolation which is the lot of these minority communities.

The role of the linguist in this enterprise is increasingly and urgently central in order to ascertain the viability of smaller languages. But the hurdles faced by academic linguists in achieving a common ground with other interested parties, a fact that receives considerable attention from Wallace and Wray (2002). Where necessary, emphasis could shift to the more restricted and targeted functional literacy. Such a decision would depend on several factors as in the case of utility in the workplace, or the wider role played in the community, should that become the immediately identifiable need. Rural realities and urbanization may also dictate the adoption or rejection of a local, indigenous minority language in favor of a second language more useful in the factory situation, for instance. It could just as well become imperative to maintain certain constants in order to preserve or conserve the existing ecology of a specific territory in the overall linguistic landscape, but not at the expense of viable local languages.

Functional literacy in its received characterization has led to the homogenization of an assortment of needs, such as in agricultural extension, occupational training, health and rural development schemes. It has thus inadvertently led to the limitation of literacy resources, a narrowing of the philosophical and epistemic foundations and objectives of literacy, thereby reducing it to the sole parameter of immediate job needs in a community, or polity at large. As a result, input from literacy specialists and linguists are subordinated to the whims of practitioners in the areas from which skills and content are drawn. Bamgbose (1984:23) cites an extreme Nigerian case in which years after the 1982 re-launch of the mass literacy campaign to eradicate adult illiteracy, contributions from linguists had not been sought in any meaningful way, in a classic struggle for turf.

It is worth reiterating that irrespective of approaches, literacy still hinges on the acquisition of language skills such as reading and writing in whatever specialized domain and language it occurs. To infer, even remotely, that these skills are incidental or ancillary to literacy is to perpetuate a misconception fuelled by the long held emphasis on a restrictive definition of functional literacy unduly limited to the factory environment. The functionality of literacy exemplified in meaningful and realistic participation in the processes of a shaky and nascent democracy such as Nigeria is important to minority territories. In fact, it ensures the survival of these communities, and guarantees them a hearing at the table of resource allocation in the sharing of the "national cake". There is no gainsaying that the gulf between language policy and self-serving language politics in Nigeria is cavernous. It is in order to highlight this situation that this paper reports on the study of the interference encountered by secondary school learners of French in Esan-West local government area of Edo State. During the study, the surprising ascendancy of French (Quid 1998) and its theoretically high profile in the education system as an "official language" could only be attributed to the spurious political calculation of the military dictatorship of the day. Only Arabic, favored strictly for its religious, unifying, if political utility, has enjoyed comparable attention.

4. French in Nigeria: an Error Analysis of Linguistic Interferences Encountered by Secondary School Students in Esan-West.

In this study, we identify, classify and analyze errors in students' written productions in French. Questionnaires were administered in the designated zone to determine mother tongues. Errors were collated and interpreted in collaboration with French teachers at a neighboring university. Instead of the mother tongues, English was found to account for structural and lexical errors, a situation further complicated by the students' questionable proficiency in it. The results, which show English as the source of interference, amply expose the quasi-absence of literacy in the mother tongue, or local language of the area, a conclusion that constitutes a serious indictment of the successive policy pronouncements on the necessity to develop local indigenous languages, which fact nourishes our interrogations.

In the aftermath of a lull, French recently returned on paper to a high profile in the Nigerian educational system, buoyed by the political calculation of the last military dictatorship. An example of such interest can be found in the successful operationalization of the French Village in Badagry, Lagos. But faced with declining enrollments and performance in French classes and terminal examinations, teachers and school administrators often focus on the more observable, extrinsic constraints such as the caliber and professional preparation of teachers, remuneration, plummeting morale and the paucity of current and appropriate resources. Yet others have attempted to blame the inhibiting factors on predominant local languages and mother tongues.

4.1 Background

Though French is a foreign language in Nigeria, it is generally recognized as a vital subject in the secondary school curriculum. Although it has curiously appeared in some places (e.g. Quid 1998) as an official language (a position historically enjoyed by English), it is by no means the language of instruction in schools. However, its importance derives from the multi-faceted relations maintained by Nigeria, an island in the sea of French speaking countries, with the Francophone world. French has always been mentioned in the National Policy on Education as a foreign language to be taught, apart from English, in secondary schools. This hackneyed policy underscores not simply the relevance of French and its place in the curriculum, but also its pervading pertinence as a foreign policy tool.

In Nigeria, the West African School Examinations (WASC), equivalent to the General Certification of Education (GCE ordinary level), in recent years the Senior Secondary School (SSS) level, constitute the zenith of secondary education. However, it has been consistently observed that only a handful of students actually enroll for French at this advanced stage of secondary education. This trend is all the more striking when it is viewed against the preponderating numbers of students enrolled for the other subjects in the curriculum. Furthermore, a negligible fraction passes the oral and written examinations in French. Several indigenous research efforts have over the years attempted to mitigate this bane and arrest the plummeting fortunes of French. Nigerian scholars and educationists have identified the problems broadly under socio-linguistic, economic, political and institutional headings. For example, according to Emordi (1985) several factors conspired to make it impossible for secondary school learners who have studied French for five or more years to express themselves and communicate in simple everyday French. Focusing on course books, he observes that they are not usually well adapted to the conditions and needs of Nigerian students. Set against the socio-cultural requirements that are foreign, the course materials do not correspond to the sociolinguistic background and necessities of the students. Some others have variously attributed the dearth of students and their dismal performance to unqualified teachers, a situation aptly captured by Echetabu (1985), who alludes to the lack of adequate quality and quantity of teachers of French.

4.2 Age of the Learner

In the Nigerian educational system, seldom is French introduced at an early age. It is only officially part of the curriculum at the secondary school level where the average age is about 12. Unfortunately, as Girard (1972:12) would note, : "cela correspond, d'après les psychologues, à la fin

de la période la plus favorable pendant laquelle la faculté d'imitation de l'enfant est considérable". However, this view is undergoing review, as some suggest that effective language learning can equally occur well past the secondary age.

4.3 School Facilities

With the country's population estimated around 120 million, coupled with poor management over the years of the country's resources, mostly by military interventionists and conniving bureaucrats, little wonder that overcrowded classrooms and crumbling facilities have been cited for students' consistently poor performance in general, and in French in particular. Emordi (1983:10) remarks that the first three classes are usually overcrowded in the secondary schools, a situation which does not have a salutary effect on learning and teaching. This no doubt is due in part to demographic explosions without a corresponding increase in facilities and personnel in schools. The deployment of French teachers to other areas depicts the negative attitude of bureaucrats and school heads toward French. Frequent and unnecessary transfers to urban areas deprive the less privileged schools with the least facilities, while concentrating the few available resources in schools in the cities. Furthermore, some school heads frequently reduce the periods normally allocated to French on the timetable. Emordi (:115) decries this practice and calls for steps to redress the trend which prevents the acquisition of the linguistic habits required of learners. Echetabu (1985) also fingers the lack of cooperation between researchers and textbook writers. She laments that research results are often ignored, and that teachers are often ignorant of such useful information, which they fail to incorporate into texts and other instructional materials.

4.4 Mutilingualism in the Classroom

The Nigerian society is irretrievably heterogeneous. Students from diverse ethno-linguistic, cultural and economic groups are exposed quite early to several languages, including their mother tongues and English. Kwofie (1985:37) cites this factor and the lack of adequately adapted resources as adversely affecting the teaching of French in Nigeria. He asserts that the African child, in most cases, has been immersed in two to five languages even before stepping into the French class for the first time. As a result, he notes that "no textbook writer could hope to incorporate all the relevant information concerning four or more languages into a single textbook" given that "everyone of those languages known by the foreign language student is a potential source of interference". Every year, French teachers complain about the diminishing number of candidates at the final School Certificate examinations. This situation, which began over three decades ago, can at best be described as bleak. For example, this writer in 1974 witnessed a class of 40 where nobody could enroll for French at the final examinations for all the reasons cited above.

4.5 Multilingualism and Linguistic Interference

Nigerian scholars have variously, as have others, examined the connection between multilingualism and interference; we avail ourselves of such studies in situating our reflections. In the Nigerian context, multilingualism derives from the very ethno-linguistic composition and plurality of the Nigerian society. Estimates range from 400 to 500 indigenous languages in Nigeria (Aito 1999 on what motivates the shifting distinction between dialect and language), from which background students are drawn into the classroom. In most cases, these students have mastered and daily employ several languages. While most of these languages present distinctive characteristics, speakers function and switch codes with relative ease, while maintaining their attachment to their own linguistic and cultural identities. This enduring link between language and society is poignantly addressed in Leclerc's *Langue et société* (1992).

However, language problems generally arise out of interference of one sort or another (Tiffen 1969), and it includes the transfer of habits associated with one's mother tongue or first language to the language being learned. And this normal exercise can also work both ways. For Grandsaigne et al. (1976:1), a simile exists between the musician and the language learner in explaining this

phenomenon. For example, a Senegalese musician brought up accustomed to the conventions governing Senegalese music will tend to introduce into his rendering of say, French music, elements of rhythm and melody that are distinctly reflective of Senegalese flavour in different shades. When a learner speaks a foreign language, it is not unexpected that phonetic, phonological, melodic, syntactical and other traits become evident. However, phonological deviations produce errors, whereas phonetic variations may be accommodated. Emordi (1986:116) therefore suggests that secondary school students whose language of instruction is compulsorily English, being bilingual or polyglot to varying degrees, are bound to encounter these transfers, negative or positive. The students' thought processes are consciously or unconsciously operated in tortuous and uneconomical ways that result in poor performances and errors in the new language.

While investigating errors due to Nigerian languages, Emordi (1986) recorded inter-linguistic errors, with particular reference to the preponderating errors traced to English. This is a somewhat dubious fact since it is not uncommon to find secondary school students with less than adequate levels of proficiency in oral and written English. To illustrate this, Emordi cites the following examples: *les vieux parents vivent bien à cause de leurs enfants* in place of *grâce à*; *les malades boivent des médicaments* in place of *prennent; une danse traditionelle* written as *une dance traditional*; *le succès* as *le success* and *plusieurs personnes* as *plusieurs persons*. The other difficulties centred around gender, verbs (conjugation), prepositions, etc. Of the six ethnic groups Emordi tested, only two, namely Edo and Igbo showed very slight interferences with French. The others, namely, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Isoko were virtually free of interference.

Catford (1964:1938) examined English prepostions and their French equivalents. She lists three categories, to wit: *on*, *at* and *in*; *onto*, *to*; *off*, *from*, *out of*, with their equivalent Fench prepcsitions : *on*, *onto* : *sur*; *at*, *to* : *à*; *in*, *into* : *dans*; *off* (away), *from*, *out*, *of* : *de*. The mastery of these grammatical elements and their use in appropriate contexts posed tremendous and overwhelming difficulties, such that distortion of meaning resulted.

The socio-psychological aspects of second language acquisition also have their attendant problems. The student is confronted with the task of not simply acquiring new information (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.), but also acquiring symbolic and idiomatic elements of a foreign cultural and ethno-linguistic community. The new words are not just new ones for already familiar concepts and things, neither are the grammar and pronunciation just different ways of expression. To use the new language effectively, the learner has to learn, constitute and stock complex elements in his language reservoir for immediate recall. This translates to an imposition of another culture on one's own lifespace.

Halliday (1964:243) also defines this as learning effective and acceptable language behaviour in situations in an unfamiliar culture. He gives some propitious circumstances that can favour this process. One of such factors is age; the younger one is, the better. The amount of meaningful experiences received is another. Kwofie (1985:37) also identifies the serious impact of interferences thus: "The fact that African children have quite often already acquired two or five languages before they start learning French means that any attempt to identify the interference phenomenon must take into account the several languages known by each pupil". Kwofie fears that unless interference was arrested, French in Africa would be creolized. He therefore suggests a detailed comparison between French and African languages. Such comparative studies are not usually done, mainly because textbooks are generally content with the presentation of grammatical structures without explicit reference to the structures of African languages. This results in defective teaching methodologies, which see French as a first language rather than a foreign language in a multilingual society. Only point by point comparison between mother-tongues and the target language can stem interference. Egonu (1972) attributes such problems as are discussed here to the learner's age, temperament, aptitude and previous knowledge. Reference is also made to the teacher's lack of knowledge of the learner's mother-tongue, thus rendering him ill-equipped to localize and help to stamp out the incidence of inhibitive transfers. For Eleberi (1983), students commit errors mostly in agreement, conjugation, spelling, accents and wrong use of words.

5. Error analysis

James (1998:1-19) recapitulates the basic principles of error analysis. The description of error analysis, in its various manifestations, invariably targets linguistic ignorance and the learner communicative strategies developed and taught in order to eliminate problems associated with grammatical and lexical problems. Errors should therefore not be misconstrued for mistakes, more so as conformity, or a lack thereof, to a system of conventions and rules does not necessarily correlate with the knowledge of their existence and the inability to respect them and communicate effectively within the norm. While there is little doubt that the specificity and uniqueness of the human language enable the conquest of the world around, it is equally to be expected that language errors mostly occur when the learners are unsuccessful in their attempt at functioning in a (new) language. Error analysis can therefore assist in "determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language" (James 1998:1). Furthermore, errors constitute an observable (recordable) phenomenon (Towell and Hawkins 1994:14). But assumptions that could be made before hand include: learners as monoglots, target language goals, interlanguage (Selinker 1972, 1992), or idiosyncratic dialect (Corder 1971), performance analysis and determination, using data generated from individual learners through the verification of learned rules and habits as a diagnostic tool. Finally, the description is often accompanied by comparison.

Harlow (1959) suggests that all learning is a process of progressive and commulative error-correction. And the coordination theory of Clark (1982) is a process in which language production is more and more into line through the identification and elimination of errors. Our study is therefore an attempt at a modest taxonomy of the errors on specified tests given to the target population of secondary school students in a specific zone where a particular mother tongue is dominant. Ineluctably, another assumption is that the dominant mother tongue is the interference source of the identifiable errors committed by the students tested. To achieve the desired results, errors would first have to be identified and analyzed before the resulting interference can be stated (Mackey 1965:5), since it is also viewed as any deviance in linguistic performance (Anasiodu 1983).

Errors have also been found to occur among some students due to negative physical and psychological conditions manifested in the forms of tiredness, nervousness, strong emotions, memory lapses and other pre-occupations. These may be sporadic and unsystematic, but they are no less important. In these circumstances, upon being recognized, these errors are corrected, if at all possible, hence they are referred to as mistakes. Errors relating to grammar focus on mechanics, spelling, punctuation, verb forms, tenses, concord, word usage, number, pluralization, prepositions, idiomatic expressions, articles, inappropriateness of use, repetitions and clumsy and meaningless expressions. These errors provide insight into the learner's extent of knowledge of the target language (Corder1975:19), especially when such errors show a systematic pattern that reveals levels of difficulty which vary with each student (Lado 1952:11). In Nigeria .erference studies have had little or no relevance in the modification of teaching and learning strate..es, a lamentable fact that speaks of the traditional attitude of preferring to grade and then ignore the potential use of faults committed by students. Errors are a precious source of information, in spite of the view that any productions of the learner should be acceptable in his or her transitional (interlanguage) dialect (Corder 1967) considered as a unique dialect to the learner in the learning process. This view criticizes as misnomers terms such as deviancy, incorrectness and non-standards.

5.1 Error taxonomy

A well known taxonomic work by Brown and Scragg (1948) attributed varieties of errors in the so-called Gold Coast English to mother tongue interferences. Examples of forms described then as erroneous are: *that's *the very man I was talking about*, and standard West African forms such *as we reached *at Accra*. These assertions have since become moot since they were tempered by works which refer to these forms as Ghanaian English. A recent dictionary of Nigerian English (Igboanusi 2002) reaffirms this notion of several Englishes. Others who have weighed in on the attitudes in error assessment and the existence of regional standards of English include Ishiyama (1982), Peterson (1988), etc. These works and their rejoinders reveal the delicacy required in the descriptions of errors

and the need to allow for registers and styles. We also refer to Burt and Kiparsky's *The Gooficon* (1972), which features a collection of goofs and their explanations from around the world, in which they conclude that mother tongues have no significant effect as they did not find that the majority of the syntactical goofs were due to the native language syntax of the learner. James (1988:179) makes a distinction in the errors attributed to mother tongues as he alludes to positive transfers which are beneficial and negative ones which constitute interference. To overcome this (:185), he suggests the need for the learner to learn the missing item, and to fill the gap through communicative strategies. Errors are therefore seen as false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, overelaboration, hypercorrection, overgeneralization and / or system simplification. In terms of gravity, errors can be measured against some linguistic criteria, such as rule infringement, comprehensibility, intelligibility, communicativity and noticeability.

6. Statement of Problem

In contemplating this study, references to French as an official language in Nigeria compelled us to propose that such claims merely constituted a deft political and diplomatic gimmick by an embattled military dictatorship. In the local government area we targeted, out of a total of 34 schools, only five still had French regularly on their timetables. In these schools, students do not see much prospect in registering for French in the final examinations now taken at the end of the Senior Secondary School terminal class, after six years of secondary education. This attitude, due in part to the aforementioned reasons, stems from consistently poor performance at these examinations. Haunted by failure, students opt for other subjects in which they are more or less guaranteed better results. Expectedly, this poses a serious concern not only to those whose business it is to teach French, but also all those who are interested in the evolution and development of French teaching in Nigeria. This intolerably uncertain situation prompted the admonition to all concerned that if the trend continued unabated and unarrested, French risked a gradual phasing-out from the schools and the teachers would risk being thrown out of their jobs. Needless to say that since then the most qualified of these teachers have either changed professions or have left for greener pastures. Those trapped in the system have nothing but tales of woe to tell.

In a study he conducted in 1977, Odilora reported that many French teachers he interviewed regretted having studied French or having opted to teach it. This corroborates the calls for the reappraisal of the place of French in the school curriculum. He was of the view that given the circumstances, French should be restricted to the upper segments of secondary schools which would correspond to the current Senior Secondary School classes. He went further by challenging the notion that the country needed French because of the surrounding Francophone countries. It is easy to see why, in spite of the political calculation of the last military dictatorship in adopting French as the country's second official language, besides English (Quid 1998:1117), French is in reality relegated and made an optional subject, more so as an alternative choice to Arabic, a language known for its religious relevance in the predominantly muslim North, and parts of the South-West. In this study, however, our main objective is to show how and why Esan, the dominant mother-tongue in the target zone, is not the source of students' interferences. The study's main thrust is not to show how French is marginalized, but to demonstrate interference through its inclusion in the curriculum as one of the few foreign languages taught across school systems in Nigeria. We therefore opted to probe factors that were intrinsic to the learner, rather than dwelling on the more extrinsic factors for poor performance, such as quality of teaching personnel and other resources, issues already sufficiently examined by applied linguistics and educationists.

6.1 The Place of French in the Nigerian Education System

The limited profile of the French language in Nigeria is historically rooted, as we previously alluded to. Its relative place is traceable to the British colonial, institutional arrangements that saw to the futility of the efforts made by France to establish serious contact. Any overtures were met with frustration as a result of British colonial attitude and policies that disallowed such interaction. However, despite its subordinate status in Nigeria, French is important to many West African countries

either as the sole official language, or in conjunction with regional or other national languages as it is the case in northern African countries.

Historically, French has been present in Africa for at least three centuries since the French presence in Senegal in the 19th Century. Later, a few other countries outside of the Francophone bloc subsequently embraced it: Nigeria (1965), Ghana (1975) Sierra Leone, Kenya and Rhodesia (all in 1945) mostly after independence in their desire to forge relations with their neighbors in close proximity. The post-independence reaction was thus swift, resulting in the introduction of French in secondary schools and in institutions of higher learning, as noted by David (1975:11) who alludes tc the need expressed by the West African countries "to escape the curse of Babel" at the ensuing meetings in Yaounde in 1961.

Mgbodile (1983:3-5) notes the post-independence necessity of French for economic and political co-operation and unity. The introduction of French in English speaking former colonies and vice versa, greatly enhanced a positive interaction between the newly independent nations. The systematic valorization of French in Nigeria, aided by UNESCO through university scholarships, is also well noted by Omolewa ((1971).

6.2 Primary School

French is not officially introduced at this level, due partly to the received view that children usually have more than one language to cope with besides English to which they are compulsorily exposed. Were it to be introduced officially at this level, it is doubtful that qualified personnel would be available to teach it. In some rare cases, however, élite schools that introduce French at this level usually emphasize the oral (Emordi 1986).

6.3 Secondary School

This level includes the grammar, vocational and teacher training post-primary institutions. In the latter, French is not taught for the reason that the student-teachers go out into primary schools upon graduation. In the current national policy on education, secondary education now lasts for six years, representing an additional year to the old 6-5-4 system. At the Junior Secondary School and Senior Secondary School levels, French is authorized as a foreign language in the curriculum. Arabic, taken as an option to French, is mainly relevant in the northern and some south-western parts of the country in areas where there are strong Islamic tendencies.

6.4 Tertiary Institutions

In principle, French is taught in Adult Education Centres and other Continuing Education programs where facilities, personnel and demand exist. In the French cultural centres strategically located in days gone by in many universities and colleges of education, as well as in other specialized institutions such as the National Defence Academy, French fared reasonably well when supported by the French Embassy in Nigeria. Bilateral and cultural programs were therefore not uncommon, thereby providing scholarships to students graduating from these institutions. In that era, French also enjoyed considerable presence in institutions outside of the normal education system. French equally had an overlapping relevance with other disciplines and to national and international activities. Kwofie (1985:33) refers to the fact that even non-French speaking countries adopted it in various ways. The act of lecturers in other faculties and outside of the departments of languages taking advantage of classes organized for them by their French-teaching colleagues in the French units and departments is a pointer to the importance of French in academic and national activities. Thus Ihehacho (1986:49) advised governments to take adequate initiatives to motivate teachers and learners to enable people to reap the benefits of studying French. The importance of French beyond its role as an academic subject includes its appreciation as a means of effective and meaningful communication with the outside world, not least in embracing other cultures.

7. THE STUDY

This study was undertaken to identify the languages that were the sources of interference encountered by the students in the designated zone. It was also to determine, in the case of polyglot students, the language that interfered most.

7.1 Scope of the Study

Our zone of activity was Esan-West and Esan Central local government areas of Edo State. The following research questions generally guided the study:

1. What language interfered most with the learning of French?
2. What are the error types identified in students' scripts?
3. What are the error types caused by the most interfering language?
4. What error types occurred most frequently?
5. What are the error levels in the schools?
6. At what class levels do the students commit the greatest number of errors?

Classes four and five students were tested in the schools where French was still offered at the time of the study. A total of 107 students particpated, out of which 57 came from Class 4, and 50 from Class 5. After administering questionnaires to determine mother tongues and other languages spoken, the test consisted of two essay topics, namely *Ma famille* (Class 4 or SSS II) and *Ma classe* (Class 5 or SSS III). These tests were done during normal classes and supervised by the regular teachers.

After correcting the scripts and categorizing the errors in consultation with local secondary and university teachers of French, two broad categories emerged, to wit: lexical errors and structural errors. In analyzing the data collected as follows, frequencies were determined and converted into percentages in consonance with the aforementioned research questions.

7.2 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Research Questions

Question 1: What language interfered most with the learning of French?

From the questionnaires, it was established that English was written and spoken by all the students. It is not surprising, since English is the official language of instruction in Nigeria. In Table 1, it can be observed that 87 or 81.30% of students in the survey claimed that they wrote and spoke Esan; it was thus the most dominant mother tongue.

TABLE 1: MOTHER TONGUES

No	LANGUAGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	Esan	87	81.30
2	Igbo / Ika	02	01.86
3	Yoruba	05	04.67
4	Okpameri	02	1.86
5	Owan	03	02.80
6	Itsekiri	03	02.86
7	Edo	05	04.67
	Total	107	100

QUESTION 2: What are the error types identified in the student's scripts?

Table 2 below indicates the errors categorized from students' scripts. These errors are traceable to English which wins the dubious title of the most interfering language.

TABLE 2: ERROR TYPES

No	ERROR TYPES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
1	Incomplete sentences	93	05.97
2	Spelling	166	10.66
3	Punctuation	95	06.10
4	Concord	49	03.14
5	Pluralization	116	07.45
6	Articles	107	06.87
7	Meaningless words / expressions	262	16.82
8	Wrong words	93	05.97
9	Repetition	29	01.86
10	Anglicism	190	12.20
11	Conjugation	250	16.05
12	Use of possessive adjectives	88	05.65
13	Other verb forms	07	0.44
14	Adjectives	09	0.57
15	Use of prepositions	03	0.19
16	Esanization (use of Esan)	0	0
	Total	1,557	100

QUESTION 3: What are the errors caused by the most interfering language?

The analysis of the committed errors showed that thirteen errors were either remotely or directly caused by exposure to English, as seen in the error types in Table 2 above.

QUESTION 4: What error types occurred most frequently?

From Table 2, errors of meaninglessness and clumsy expressions ranked first with 16.28% of the total errors. This was closely followed by errors of conjugation scoring 16.05%.

QUESTION 5: What are the error levels in the schools? (Table 3, with Schools 1-5)

From the Table 3, School 2 ranks first with the greatest number of errors with 448 or 28.77%. Next is School 4 with 356 errors or 22.77%, followed by School 1 which shows 327 or 21% of the errors. Fourth is School 5 with 215 errors or 13.80%, while the least number of errors show against School 3 with 211 or 13.55% total errors.

The two schools with the least number of errors would not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with secondary education in the area surveyed. However, we expected that School 5 would score the least number of errors given its close association with the University which had, at the time of this study, a thriving French Unit under the Department of Languages and Literature (this unit has since become a full fledged Department of French. We do have to state here that School 3, formerly run by the Catholic Church, maintained one of the very best track records in the whole of the region for many years in all terminal examinations.

QUESTION 6: At what class level do the students commit the greater number of errors?

In Table 4 below, we observe that Class IV with a total of 1, 181 errors or 75.85% beat Class V students with 376 or 24.14%. A reasonable conclusion would be that Class V had more exposure and more practice of French than Class IV.

TABLE 3: ERROR LEVELS IN SCHOOLS

ERRORS	SCHOOLS									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Incomplete Sentences	41	12.53	15	03.34	13	06.16	22	06.17	02	0.93
Spelling	33	10.09	41	08.40	13	06.16	48	13.48	31	14.41
Punctuation	10	03.05	16	03.57	25	11.84	29	08.14	15	06.97
Concord	08	02.44	20	04.46	01	0.47	06	01.68	14	06.51
Plural	16	04.89	51	11.38	12	05.68	17	04.77	20	09.30
Articles	20	06.11	34	10.39	24	11.37	17	04.77	12	05.58
Clumsy Exp.	53	16.20	69	15.40	30	14.21	62	17.41	48	22.32
Wrong Words	19	05.81	45	10.04	05	02.36	17	04.77	07	03.25
Repetition	05	01.52	08	01.78	06	02.84	10	02.80	0	0
Anglicism	29	08.86	39	08.70	38	18	45	12.64	39	18.13
Conjugation	72	22.01	82	18.30	26	12.32	61	17.13	09	04.18
Possessive Adjectives	17	05.19	23	05.13	12	05.68	22	06.17	14	06.51
Other Verbs	01	0.30	0	0	5	02.36	0	0	01	0.46
Adjectives	03	0.91	05	01.11	0	0	0	0	01	0.46
Prepositions	0	0	0	0	1	0.47	0	0	02	0.93
Esanization	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	327	100	448	100	211	100	356	100	215	100
%	21		28		13. 55		22.86		13. 80	

TABLE 4: ERROR TYPES BY CLASS LEVEL

	ERROR TYPES	C L A S S E S					
		IV		V			
		F	%	F	%	TOTAL	%
1	Incomplete Sentences	76	06.43	17	04.52	93	05.97
2	Spelling	138	11.68	28	07.44	166	10.66
3	Punctuation	73	06.18	22	05.85	95	06.10
4	Concord	32	02.70	17	04.52	49	03.14
5	Pluralization	90	07.62	26	06.91	116	07.45
6	Wrong Use of Articles	83	07.03	24	06.38	107	06.87
7	Meaningless and Clumsy Expressions	202	17.10	60	15.95	262	16.82
8	Wrong Words	72	06.09	21	05.58	93	05.97
9	Repetition	28	02.37	01	0.26	29	01.86
10	Anglicism	137	11.60	53	14.09	190	12.20
11	Conjugation	174	14.73	76	20.21	250	16.05
12	Possessive Adjectives	66	05.58	22	05.85	88	05.65
13	Other Verb Forms	04	0.33	03	0.79	07	0.44
14	Adjectives	03	0.25	06	1.59	09	0.57
15	Use of Prepositions	03	0.25	0	0	03	0.19
16	Esanization	0	0	0	0	0	0
	TOTAL	1181	100	376	100	1557	100
	%	75.85		24.14			

7.3 Brief Description of Errors

1. Incomplete Sentences

This type of error manifests in the inability of students to logically terminate their sentences. Such sentences are unfinished, thereby leading to no meaning, or incomplete meaning. Examples are as follows:*Ma soeur Gladys New Era Colleg; Mon frere Stanley Bendel State; Ils habitent dans leur grand; Ma famille est une petite*; *Ma famille quaronte*. The problems with the foregoing examples include punctuation, omissions, lack of the appropriate vocabulary, spelling, use of English words, etc. In all, this error showed up in Table 5 with a frequency of 93 or 5.97%

2. Spelling

This category involves incomplete or wrong spelling of words. Examples are:
Ma miere est dons...; *Il y a quatre enfnfants; Ma cousin est pauver; Other words are: Fammille, addresse, Mosieur, sept persons, quatzos*. This error accounted for 166 of total errors or 10.66%.

3. Punctuation

This error includes the use of punctuation and accents. Examples are: *Garcon, pere, marche for marché, l horloge*. Others are: *Il y a douze garcons il y; A trois filles ma miere mon pere;* This type of error occurred 95 times or 6.10%.

4. Concord

This is most evident in the form of subject / verb, subject / adjective disagreements and in gender. Examples include : *Ma famille est grand; Ma mère, mon père, mon frère sont content; Mon parents sont très jeune.*

5. Pluralization

This error type arrises out of the shift in persons or numbers. Examples include: *Mes parent, mon frères; Il y a six garçon sept fille.*

6. Wrong Use of Articles

This concerns the faulty use of both the definite and indefinite articles. Examples are: *Nous aimons faine lessive; Nous aimons television; La pere, le soeur*...This error had a total frequency of 107 or 6.87 of errors detected.

7. Meaningless and Clumsy Expressions

The sentences in this category were without any discernible sense or meaning :
Vos soeurs et vos l'école; Il y a faites-vous le noel; Parceque elle regarde apres moi; J'ai gar lar lan cousin un. It is tough in these circumstances to hazard a guess, but a plausible explanation might be that a lack of vocabulary interferes significantly with the students' thought processes. This situation is aggravated when they are bombarded with increasingly complex expressions in the last two years at the Secondary School.

8. Wrong Words / Verbs

This shows in the (in)appropriateness of words chosen in the expression of ideas. Examples: *Cousins m'appel Fidelis; Mon age est quatorze ans; Je suis quinze ans; Ma mere est medicamen.* This is another manifestation of a very limited French vocabulary and the influence of English, both of which accounted for 93 errors or 5.97%.

9. Anglicisms

Words are borrowed from English to make for an apparent deficit in French vocabulary, but in some other instances, words that show up are neither descernibly English nor French. These errors showed a frequency of 190 or 12.20%. Examples include : *Je wash assiette est sweep on dimanche; Il est lecturer dans Lagos State; Il a bicyclette repairer.*

10. Conjugation

Subject / verb disagreement showed up 250 times, or 16.65 of the time. Examples are: *J'aimer jouer au football J'aller à l'église sur dimanche*

11. Use of Possessive Adjectives

This problem is symptomatic of the failure to harmonize the gender and number of the noun in the group. For example: *Ma pere... man famille*, etc. It also readily betrays the students' inability to internalize some of the more basic arbitrary elements of the French language which are critical for sentence construction and the understanding of certain morpho-syntactic functions of grammatical items.

12. Adjectives (position)

This was noticed in cases such as: *J'ai un gentil pere; Il est dans primaire école*. A total of 9 such errors or 0.57% were noticed.

13. Prepositions

In many cases, this error was simply a case of omission of prepositions: *Mon cousin frequente école à primaire dans Imo State*; *Il est dans Imo State*; *Je fais la lessive sur samedi*. No doubt English prepositions are interfering here.

8. Conclusions

The nature of most errors discussed above points glaringly to the English language. This is hardly surprising as it is the language in which all official communication takes place in schools. In our other interactions with the students, we also noticed phonetic and phonological inconsistencies that would concern the oral production; however, we did not set out to examine them per se, as we dealt with written productions.

Esan, the most dominant mother tongue among the students was found to have no interference on the learning of written French. Instead, 13 of the 16 identified errors or 81.25% reflected confusions emanating from English. In our considered opinion, it is due to the fact that Esan is not yet fully linguistically described. It is hardly taught in Primary Schools (contrary to the optimism expressed in SIL 1996), even where teachers are equipped to do so. The absence of any interferences emanating from Esan is revealing, and confirms identical studies on marginalized indigenous, local languages to which we have alluded. The confusion demonstrated by students on the essays was mostly due to a defective process of vocabulary acquisition. If they demonstrated a lack of mastery of fundamental and everyday French, it must be noted that in the English language, they hardly fared any better

8.1 Educational Implications

This study shows errors of linguistic transfers encountered by students learning French in Okpebho Local Government Area, now Esan-West LGA. Our conclusions suggest the following implications. Indubitably, English plays, wrongly or rightly, the role of the source language of the students, as opposed to the conventional wisdom that would immediately implicate the mother tongues. Consequently, our assertion is important for both teacher and learner. Unless such identified errors are exhaustively analyzed, they will continue to undermine the effectiveness of the learning process.

Students do not write French at a level expected of them in the classes tested. Being the culminating classes at the time of the testing, the tests show that four or five years of studying French in these schools did not produced the desired results. At this rate, students will continue to experience grave difficulties in their final examinations. If students continue to fail in large percentages, there is little doubt that they will continue to find in French an unattractive choice.

Esan regrettably plays a neutral (at least a dormant, recessive) role in the interference problems we collated. This observation might paradoxically be a relief for teachers, some of whom do not necessarily speak the language. Sadly, though an important regional language in Edo State, Esan is yet to be seriously considered for school curricula even in areas where it is dominant, not least in elementary schools. This is symptomatic of the failure to formulate and implement appropriate language policies at the state and local government levels. In some sense, had Esan interfered, it would have constituted an indication that students have attained some level of written communication in it, thereby implying that the language is receiving the attention it deserves.

8.2 Recommendations

Secondary school teachers of foreign languages should first have some knowledge of the source language of the learners such as Esan. The students' vocabulary should be improved by means

of dialogues, drills, situational teaching and exposure to a variety of topics in prose and poetry in the autochthonous languages. Teachers have a stake in going the extra mile in availing themselves of the results contained in studies of indigenous languages. Where no such information exists, teachers should seize the moment and take the initiative. They should therefore deploy their efforts in incorporating local languages in the curriculum. Dominant mother tongues deserve to be studied and their characteristics exploited to assist in the learning of a new language, foreign or not. Moreover, at the local, state and national levels, efforts must be redoubled in ensuring that potentially viable local languages receive, as a matter of deliberate and sustained policy, the resources necessary to ensure their development and to avert their unnecessary loss.

8.3 Limitations of the Study

During the course of the study, some teachers were fiercely resistant to the idea of testing their students. Such surprisingly uncooperative attitude often demonstrated their lack of understanding of the object of the study. It also revealed a lackluster appreciation of the need to study Esan and the other mother tongues. The compromise reached was to generically designate their schools, hence our numerical references as substitutes for their actual names. Of most disturbing significance was the apparent unwillingness and inability of Local Government authorities and the local Education Ministry to provide us with relevant policies, even as there was no evidence of funding for the study of local languages. As a suggestion for further study, more comparative studies of the dominant indigenous languages remain a sine qua non. In the meantime, it is critically desirable to institute a serious inquiry into the overall educational policy concerning the teaching of local languages.

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